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Students' Use and Misuse of Reading Skills:
A Report to a Faculty

WILLIAM G. PERRY, JR.

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Students' Use and Misuse of Reading Skills: A Report to a Faculty

One of the obvious responsibilities of a director of a special guidance service in a university is to report from his experience to his faculty. He will communicate successfully, however, only if he can step outside his job and talk about his work in the perspective of the broad educational purposes of the institution. Given this perspective, he can address himself to the ordinary rhetorical problems of eliciting the interest and respect of his listeners in ways appropriate to his message, his community, and his person.

This report by the Director of the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard was a short talk in a regular faculty meeting. In it he presents some provocative observations which he has derived from developing a course in reading improvement and, more recently, from a rather unusual test of reading.

We present the script of his talk not only for the interest of its content, but for the illustration it affords of singularly effective communication in such a setting.

Mr. Perry, Director of the Bureau of Study Counsel for the past twelve years, has written a number of articles on counseling, reading, and education, and has previously contributed to this journal.

WILLIAM G. PERRY, JR., *Director, Bureau of Study Counsel*

MR. PRESIDENT, TWENTY YEARS AGO this Faculty undertook an experiment to see if some of its students could be taught to read better. Since the Faculty was then something of a pioneer in such an enterprise, it would seem appropriate that it should receive, after two decades, at least a report of progress—the more so because the work now concerns not the correction of the disabilities of a few students but the direction of the abilities of a large proportion of the freshman class.

The students of this college are reputed to spend a good deal of time

reading. In fact, a student sits with his books for nearly a thousand hours each year. The Faculty has a deep concern that these hours be fruitful. This concern is evident in the wording of assignments, in the layout of instruction in each course, and in the conversations of teachers with their students.

It was this same concern that started the original experiment in reading improvement in 1938. The experiment began with a rather mechanical emphasis. It consisted of an instructor whose main job was to run a projector for the first Harvard Reading Films, and of some thirty student volunteers, hopefully the worst readers in the freshman class (and at that time there apparently were some freshmen who for Harvard's intents and purposes found it hard to read at all). The class met for about 18 or 20 sessions and engendered enough enthusiasm to become, like many an experiment, a kind of annual fixture, this one known as the Remedial Reading Course. Each year freshmen as they arrived in the fall would take a reading test and those who scored lowest would be informed of their plight and allowed to volunteer for the continued experiment.

When the Bureau of Study Counsel took over the actual instruction in this course in 1946, we met with thirty depressed-looking volunteers one evening in a basement classroom somewhere. Not knowing really what we were up against, we gave them still another reading test of a standard sort and discovered that every single one of them could score better on this test than 85% of the college freshmen in the country. We felt that to be useful to these people in their genuine dissatisfaction we were going to have to take a new look at the reading improvement game. We therefore abandoned the word "Remedial" for the course and upgraded the material until it could jar the teeth of the average graduate student. Then we threw the doors open.

The amount of enthusiasm that exists in this community to read better—or if not better, then at least faster—is evidenced by the fact that we soon found ourselves with nearly 800 people enrolled in the course. When we examined the roll, we found that we had some 400 freshmen from Harvard and Radcliffe, 150 upperclassmen, 230 graduate students from the various schools, especially that of Business Administration, and 2 professors—from the Law School.

Although the fees paid by these multitudes looked very attractive on the budget of a small office, we came to feel this was stretching our energies too far. We have subsequently cut the class in half and have been trying to make some sensible system of priorities whereby we might offer first chance on seats to roughly that third of the freshman class that might be most likely to benefit from this kind of instruction. In trying to find out who these people might be, we have turned up some observations about freshmen which may be of interest to the Faculty.

One wonders first of all why students who read, on tests, as well as these do, should want to attend a reading course at all, much less one that meets daily at 8 o'clock in the morning. Of course a number come in hope of magic—some machine they've heard of that will stretch their eyes until they can see a whole page at a glance. This is understandable. Freshmen are deprived rather abruptly of the luxury of thinking that reading is something they can finish, and are confronted instead with an infinite world of books in which they sense that they may forever feel behind, or even illiterate.

But year by year it has become more apparent that what the students lack is not mechanical skills but flexibility and purpose in the use of them—the capacity to adjust themselves to the variety of reading materials and purposes that exist on a college level.

What they seem to do with almost any kind of reading is to open the book and read from word to word, having in advance abandoned all responsibility in regard to the purpose of the reading to those who had made the assignment. They complain consequently of difficulty in concentrating and feel that they have "read" whole assignments but are unable to remember anything in them. We have therefore shifted the emphasis of the reading course away from mechanics over to an effort to shake students loose from this conscientious but meaningless approach to their work. We have found that if they can be persuaded of their right to think, even though reading, they can then develop a broader and more flexible attack on the different forms of study and put their skills to meaningful use even on long assignments.

In offering freshmen priority on seats in the course, therefore, we have naturally wanted to know about their flexibility and their sense of purpose in reading. This is a hard thing to measure. To make some estimate of it we designed a new kind of reading test—as reading tests go it may really be rather peculiar—and presented it to the freshmen of Harvard and Radcliffe when they arrived this September. We suspected the students might learn more from it than we would, but this seemed a legitimate chance to take. I should like to describe this test and to tell you what the students did with it.

First of all, instead of the usual short passages which appear on reading tests, we presented students with thirty pages of detailed material—a complete chapter from a history book. We asked them to imagine that they were enrolled in a course entitled *The Growth of Western Institutions*. We asked them to picture themselves sitting down one evening to study one assignment in this course—this chapter entitled "The Development of the English State, 1066-1272." They were to suppose that they had two hours ahead of them for this work, but that after all, they still had their French

to do and some Chemistry to review before they went to bed. At the same time, they were to imagine that in this course an hour-examination would be given in about a week on which they would be asked to write a short essay and to "identify" important details. We told them to go ahead about their reading in whatever way they thought best and to take notes if they wished. We told them that this was a test of what they derived from the early stages of their study of regular assignments and that in about 20 minutes or so we would stop them and ask them questions appropriate to their particular method of work. We then turned them loose.

Twenty-two minutes later we stopped them and asked them what they had been doing. If they reported that they had been reading from the very beginning and going straight ahead into the chapter—whether rapidly the first reading, or carefully with a more rapid review in mind—we gave them regular multiple-choice questions on the chapter as far as they had gone in it. Up to this point the test was fairly standard, and we can report that the vast majority of the students, over ninety percent of them in fact, reported that this was exactly what they had done. We can report that their rate of work in this particular approach was astonishing and their capacity to answer multiple-choice questions on detail was impressive. Some of them had read as many as twenty pages of very detailed material and were able to answer accurately every sensible question we could ask them, *about the detail*.

The freshman class—as far as we could see—of both Harvard and Radcliffe, consisted of a most remarkable collection of readers—in the narrow sense of the term. The showing is most remarkable because, of course, these ninety percent of the class were going at this chapter *in the hardest way imaginable*.

Let me explain what I mean. The chapter in question is an admirable piece of exposition, but like many admirable chapters it makes no initial statement of its aims, and it takes a little while to get going. And as a consequence, the reader who begins at the beginning with the Battle of Hastings and reads word by word is likely to find himself at page three hopelessly bogged down in the shires, the hundreds and the marches of Anglo-Saxon England. And after ten minutes or so, this was just where the students reported themselves to be. What we were interested to determine was how many students in the face of this burden of detail, the purpose of which was not clear, would have the moral courage—or should we call it the immoral courage—to pull themselves out and look at the ending of the chapter. Or even to survey the entire marginal gloss set out like sign posts page by page. The very ending has a bold flag out beside it which says—"Recapitulation." As a summary paragraph we doubt that we have ever seen a better one. From a half minute of study of this paragraph the whole

development of the chapter becomes immediately clear to a reader and puts him in a strong position, not only to select among details as he reads them, but also to remember, for their meaningfulness, the details he would need to support an intelligent discourse.

Out of these 1500 of the finest freshman readers in the country only one hundred fifty even made a claim to have taken a look ahead during twenty minutes of struggle with the chapter. And the vast majority of these seemed to have looked ahead only to determine how long the assignment was.

We asked anyone who could do so to write a short statement about what the chapter was all about. The number who were able to tell us, in terms that had something to do with the growth of institutions, was just one in a hundred-fifteen.

As a demonstration of obedient purposelessness in the reading of 99% of freshmen we found this impressive. We had been looking for the one-third of the class most in need of our beneficent instruction and we had found just about everybody. We tried to find out if the students had behaved this way simply because it was a test—they reported no, that they always worked this way. When we pointed the ending out to them, some said, "You mean you can sometimes tell what a chapter is about by looking at the end?" and others said, "O Lord, how many times have I been told!"

Told or not, after twelve years of reading homework assignments in school they had all settled into the habit of leaving the point of it all to someone else. We knew from our own efforts to teach independence of approach in reading that students find it hard to hear us even when the sheer bulk of college work could be handled in no other way. And we supposed that school-teachers had an even harder time of it. We were therefore prepared to find this widespread passivity of purpose; we wished to go beyond this and to identify those students whose misconceptions of reading involved something worse, a positive misconception of aim, a notion of the purpose of reading so at variance with the goals of Harvard that they might be especially slow at learning from their college experience. We had therefore added another turn to our test.

We asked the students to imagine further that in their imaginary course an examination had been given on which an essay question on this chapter had appeared. This question (which we hoped was a proper-type Harvard essay question) read: "From 1066-1272, the Norman and Angevin kings laid the foundations of English self-government both by their strengths and by their weaknesses." *Discuss. (Twenty minutes)*. We then presented them with two answers, purporting to have been written by two students. The first of these was a chronological reiteration of the chapter by a student with an extraordinary memory for dates and kings and no concern for the question (or for any intellectual issue at all, for that matter). We calculated

that no instructor with a shred of compassion in him could give this answer less than a C—even though it might deserve less. The second essay answer, shorter, and with hardly a date in it, addressed itself stringently to the issues posed by the question. We supposed this answer to be worth a B+, or perhaps an A—to a relieved instructor.

In validating the test, we had then begged the assistance of the chief section man in a real course, not wholly unlike this imaginary course of ours, and asked him to grade the essays. Of the first, he said that he really couldn't give the student a D because he had worked so hard; of the second, we were pleased to hear him say that this was obviously an A student, even though all he was going to get on this essay was a B+.

To the freshmen, then, we presented on the test these two answers without reporting their value and asked them to state which of the essays was the better, which the worse, and to give their reasons. We are happy to say that on this they did quite well. Only two hundred students graded the better essay the worse, and only two hundred more gave the wrong reasons for the correct grading. This means that, on this particular measure, only a rough third of our freshmen showed themselves to be headed toward the wrong goals. Very possibly, were this same test to be given later in the year, the percentage would be much less. But we have experience to support that the tendency persists—often tragically.

These then were the students to whom we turned our attention. Until such students revise their sense of the purpose of reading, an increase in effort is likely to produce only worse results. Oddly, we have as yet found nothing else to distinguish them from other people. The number of them who come from public schools as against private schools is exactly the same as for the class as a whole, and they are by no means the least intelligent members of their class. We are eager to find if we can learn more about how they get their misconceptions. We hope that the Reading Course may help to turn some of them around. Perhaps the test itself helped; the section man who helped us with the test was quick to point out its instructional possibilities, and we gave the text and essays to the students to take with them, together with a page of comments. It was encouraging to have to thread one's way afterwards through knots of students working over their papers.

What might the faculty conclude from all this? As the faculty's agent in this area, I can report my own conclusions from this twenty-year experiment.

1. It appears that most students can learn to read better.
2. The instruction that assists them to do so does not center in the mechanics of reading. The mechanics of reading skill are inseparable at this level from the individual's purpose as he reads. If you train someone in

mechanics alone, he drops right back into his old habits the minute he picks up an assigned text.

3. The possession of excellent reading skills as evidenced on conventional reading tests is no guarantee that a student knows how to read long assignments meaningfully. The fact that the Admissions Committee is providing students of higher and higher ability should not lull the Faculty into feeling that at last it does not have to teach students how to study. In fact the responsibility is only the greater, for these students have the ability to muddle through assignments the wrong way and still get that wretched C-.

4. There can be no general rules for teaching the exercise of judgment in reading. Such judgment requires courage, and courage cannot be taught by rule, it can only be dared, or redirected, in ways appropriate to particular subjects and learning tasks. To be sure, the reading of conflicting authorities is a fertile ground for young courage, and an excellent exercise in reading skill. And a C- for the attainment of useless knowledge is perhaps less of a kindness in the long run than congratulations for effort and a clean E for expending it in the wrong game. However, the individual instructor in his own course remains the best judge of how to set up his assignments so that they demand a redirection of effort toward judgment and away from ritual.

5. A short separate course of general instruction, like the Reading Class can be of some contributing value, if only because it offers a moment's freedom to experiment without the threat of failure. But its limits are very clear. In such a course we can only dramatize the issues, and this only in the area of very general expository reading. We can refer only briefly to science and must leave literature explicitly alone. We feel, too, that only a narrow line of spirit divides such instruction from an invitation to mere gamesmanship. We sometimes worry, in teaching method without content, lest students gather that we recommend a glance at the ending of chapters and at nothing else. (We do dare students to suppose that even this is sometimes appropriate.)

I should like to be able to report, in conclusion, that when we do succeed in introducing students to the rigors of thoughtful reading they are invariably grateful. I must confess, a bit ruefully, that this is not always the case. I have here a description of this kind of instruction in a student's words. To assist us in developing the course we have occasionally given the students a questionnaire at the end, and this one of a year or so ago was a real up-to-date Social-Science-type questionnaire: open ended at the beginning, pointed at the end, and all. It says here, "What did you expect when you came to this course?" Big space. "What do you think about it now?" Big space. On the other side a lot of specific questions. We did not ask students

to sign their names, only to enter the scores they made at the beginning and end of the course.

This student's scores when he came to the course showed him to have derived only a D— kind of understanding from considerable study of the material. At the end he was obtaining a straight A understanding in one-third of the time. I remember settling back with this one in anticipation of those comments that a teacher so loves to hear—but not at all. He was furious. "What did you expect when you came to this course?" "I expected an *organized effort to improve my reading*." "What do you think about it now?" "This has been the *sloppiest* and most *disorganized* course I have ever taken. Of course, I have made some progress, but this was due *entirely* to my own efforts . . ."